

Message Text

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E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT UK
SUBJECT: THE GENERAL ELECTION: THE IDEOLOGICAL GROUND

SUMMARY. IDEOLOGY PLAYS LESS OF A ROLE IN BRITISH
POLITICS THAN IN MANY SOCIETIES, AND DOCTRINAL DISPUTES
APPEAL MORE TO THE DEBATER IN BRITISH LIFE THAN TO THE
VOTER. WHILE SETTING MUCH OF THE TONE OR ATMOSPHERE OF
AN ELECTION, IDEOLOGY IS GENERALLY REGARDED BY POLITI-
CIANS HERE AS A RALLYING FLAG AROUND WHICH VARIOUS POWER

GROUPS MIGHT CONVENIENTLY GATHER. IT WOULD THEREFORE
BE DECEPTIVE TO REGARD INTRA-PARTY OR PARLIAMENTARY
POLITICS IN BRITAIN AS A COMPETITION BETWEEN CLEARLY
DEFINED IDEOLOGICAL BLOCS, AND SUCH A VIEW WOULD OVER-
LOOK THE WIDE VARIETY AND NUANCED SPECTRUM OF INDIVIDUAL
POLITICAL PHILOSOPHIES THAT EXIST HERE. STILL, THERE
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IS A THEORY CURRENT IN BRITISH POLITICS THAT THE
POLITICAL AND IDEOLOGICAL CONSENSUS WHICH HAS UNDER-
PINNED SUCCESSIVE GOVERNMENTS SINCE THE WAR HAS BEEN
SEVERELY WEAKENED OVER THE LAST FEW YEARS. CONSERVA-
TIVES, ESPECIALLY, CLAIM THAT DOCTRINAIRE MARXISM IS
MARCHING INELUCTABLY INTO CONTROL OF THE LABOR PARTY,
AND VOICES ON THE LEFT CLAIM THAT THE TORY RIGHT WING

HAS ALREADY TAKEN OVER LEADERSHIP OF THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY. THESE CROSS-ACCUSATIONS ARE NOT NEW TO BRITISH POLITICS AND TO SOME DEGREE EMPHASIZE IMPORTANT DIFFERENCES OF APPROACH BETWEEN THE PARTIES, PARTICULARLY ON QUESTIONS OF ECONOMIC MANAGEMENT AND PUBLIC EXPENDITURE. BUT AT LEAST FOR THE MOMENT, THE PREMIERSHIP OF JIM CALLAGHAN HAS DONE MUCH TO REFURBISH THE IMAGE OF A SAGGING CENTER IN BRITISH POLITICS, AND HIS BRAND OF SOCIAL DEMOCRACY IS WIDELY VIEWED AS A MODERN MIDDLE GROUND BETWEEN COMPETING THEORIES OF GOVERNMENT. LEADERSHIP AND IDEOLOGICAL DIRECTIONS IN THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY ARE LESS CERTAIN, ALTHOUGH EXPERIENCE SUGGESTS THAT PARTIES WHICH DRIFT TO AN EXTREME WHEN IN OPPOSITION QUICKLY MODERATE WHEN IN POWER. WHATEVER THE STATE OF CENTER POLITICS IN BRITAIN, HOWEVER, ITS BEST INSURANCE IS THE ENDURING PRAGMATISM OF THE BRITISH VOTING PUBLIC. END SUMMARY.

1. IT IS CERTAIN THAT BRITAIN WILL FACE A GENERAL ELECTION WELL BEFORE THE END OF NEXT YEAR, AND THE BETTING HERE STILL STRONGLY FAVORS OCTOBER 1978. THE ODDS LENGTHEN, HOWEVER, WHEN IT COMES TO PREDICTING A WINNER, OR EVEN WHETHER ONE OR THE OTHER OF THE MAJOR PARTIES WILL EMERGE WITH A CLEAR OPERATING MAJORITY IN PARLIAMENT. BUT OBSERVERS DO AGREE THAT THE NEXT GENERAL ELECTION WILL LIKELY BE AMONG THE MOST IMPORTANT IN

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BRITAIN'S POST-WAR HISTORY. WITH HELP FROM THE NORTH SEA AND THE IMF, LABOR HAS BROUGHT THE COUNTRY FROM THE DARK HOURS OF 1974 INTO A GLIMMER OF DAYLIGHT, AND ANOTHER ELECTORAL VICTORY COULD ASSURE THEIR DOMINANCE OF BRITISH POLITICS WELL INTO THE NEXT DECADE. THE CONSERVATIVES HAVE LOST FOUR OF THE LAST FIVE ELECTIONS, AND ANOTHER FAILURE RISKS STAMPING THE TORIES AS THE NATURAL PARTY OF OPPOSITION.

THE POLITICAL CENTER:

2. SOME OBSERVERS GO FURTHER AND ASSERT THAT THE RESULT OF THE NEXT ELECTION WILL BE CRUCIAL, NOT ONLY FOR THE POLITICAL PROSPERITY OF THE RESPECTIVE PARTIES BUT FOR THE VERY NATURE OF BRITISH POLITICS. FOR THIS SCHOOL OF THOUGHT, BRITISH GOVERNMENTS SINCE THE WAR, WHETHER CONSERVATIVE OR LABOR, HAVE MORE OR LESS OPERATED FROM A POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CONSENSUS WHICH THE LEADERSHIP OF BOTH PARTIES SHARED IN BROAD OUTLINE IF NOT IN ALL ITS DETAILS. THIS CONSENSUS HAS RARELY BEEN QUESTIONED AND NEVER SERIOUSLY CHALLENGED. IT SUPPORTS MODERATE POLITICS, A MIXED ECONOMY AND THE ATLANTIC COMMUNITY; IT IS REGARDED AS A POLITICAL

PHENOMENON THAT DISTINGUISHES BRITAIN FROM MANY OF ITS EUROPEAN COUNTERPARTS. IDEOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES HAVE REMAINED, OF COURSE, AND ARE HIGHLIGHTED IN ELECTION MANIFESTOS AND PARTY CONFERENCES. BUT THE REAL POLITICAL DIVIDING LINE ON MOST ISSUES IN BRITAIN TENDS

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TO FALL WITHIN ONE PARTY OR THE OTHER AND NOT NEATLY BETWEEN THE TWO, AND EACH PARTY HAS IMPLEMENTED POLICIES MUCH WITHIN THE SAME SOCIAL FRAMEWORK.

3. UNDER LABOR, LEGISLATION FOR THE MANAGEMENT OF THE ECONOMY OR FOR SOCIAL WELFARE HAS STEMMED FROM AN EGALITARIAN DESIRE TO CREATE A MORE EQUITABLE STANDARD OF LIVING FOR THE POPULATION AS A WHOLE. TORIES HAVE REGARDED GOVERNMENT AS A DUTY IN WHICH THE GOVERNORS IMPROVE THE CONDITION OF THE GOVERNED, AND WHILE SOME OF THIS MAY TASTE OF NOBLESSE OBLIGE, CONSERVATIVE GOVERNMENTS SINCE THE WAR HAVE INTRODUCED MUCH OF BRITAIN'S PROGRESSIVE SOCIAL LEGISLATION. BOTH PARTIES APPEARED TO ARRIVE AT THE SAME POINT -- ACTIVE GOVERNMENT FOR THE GREATER GOOD -- BY DIFFERENT PATHS, AND IT IS THIS OVERLAPPING CONSENSUS BETWEEN THE LABOR RIGHT AND THE TORY LEFT THAT HAS STABILIZED BRITISH

POLITICS AND PRODUCED THE CENTRIST GOVERNMENTS OF
MEASURED ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CHANGE.
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THE TORY VIEW OF LABOR:

4. WHAT NOW DISQUIETS SOME OBSERVERS, PARTICULARLY
CONSERVATIVES, IS THE APPARENT WEAKENING OF THIS LONG
ESTABLISHED CONSENSUS AND THE ACCOMPANYING LOSS OF CON-
FIDENCE BY THE INTELLECTUAL CENTER. FROM BOTH ENDS OF
THE POLITICAL SPECTRUM, THEY SAY, THE CENTER IS UNDER
PRESSURE. FABIAN SOCIAL POLITICS AND KEYNESIAN
ECONOMICS, WHICH FORM THE CORE OF THE CONSENSUS, HAVE
SIMPLY FAILED, THEY SAY, TO KEEP BRITAIN COMPETITIVE IN
THE POST-WAR WORLD OF MODERN INDUSTRIAL DEMOCRACIES.
CLASS IS AS DIVISIVE AS EVER, AND THE ECONOMY CONTINUES
TO STAGNATE DESPITE ALL THE SCHEMES AND TINKERING. THE
GROWTH OF MINOR PARTIES, "REGIONAL NATIONALISM" AND THE
CONSTITUTIONAL STRAINS OF DEVOLUTION ARE SEEN AS
FURTHER SIGNS THAT THE CENTER IS LOSING ITS GRAVITY.
THE MIDDLE OF THE ROAD HAS LED NOWHERE, THE CRITICS
ARGUE, AND THE FABLED BRITISH DISEASE IS MERELY A
SYMPTOM OF THE INADEQUACY OF CENTRIST POLITICS.

5. DEPENDING ON THE POINT OF VIEW, THESE OBSERVERS
CLAIM THAT THE GOVERNMENTS OF THE LAST THREE DECADES
HAVE INTERVENED EITHER TOO MUCH OR TOO LITTLE IN THE
TRADITIONAL STRUCTURE OF BRITISH SOCIETY. ON THE ONE
HAND, THEY SEE A DANGER THAT THE VOTING PUBLIC WILL
CONCLUDE THE CENTRISTS HAVE FAILED BECAUSE GOVERNMENTS
DID TOO LITTLE; ON THE OTHER, THAT THE PUBLIC MIGHT
AGREE WITH THOSE ON THE LEFT WHO CLAIM THAT THE ONLY
THING WRONG WITH BRITISH SOCIALISM IS THAT THERE HASN'T
BEEN ENOUGH OF IT. CONSERVATIVES OF ALMOST EVERY
STRIPE NOW WARN THAT WE ARE BOUND TO SEE THE GRADUAL
ASCENDANCY OF THE RADICAL LEFT WITHIN THE LABOR PARTY
AND THE CONCOMITANT DECLINE OF THE CALLAGHAN-BRAND OF
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SOCIAL DEMOCRACY. THE LEFT, THE TORY ARGUMENT GOES,
ALREADY DOMINATES THE NATIONAL EXECUTIVE OF THE LABOR
PARTY AND IN MANY CASES CONTROLS CONSTITUENCY PARTY
ORGANIZATIONS, PARTICULARLY WHERE TORY INCUMBENTS HAVE
STRONG MAJORITIES, BUT ALSO IN CONSTITUENCIES WHERE THEY
HAVE ONLY MARGINAL LEADS. IF LABOR WINS THE NEXT ELEC-
TION, THEREFORE, THE RANKS OF THE LEFT-WING TRIBUNE

GROUP IN PARLIAMENT WILL INCREASE; IF LABOR LOSES, THE LEFT-WING CAUSE WILL THRIVE IN OPPOSITION. EITHER WAY, THE EXTREME LEFT GAINS.

6. SO, TORIES ARGUE, MODERATE SOCIAL DEMOCRATS IN THE LABOR PARTY ARE FIGHTING A REAR-GUARD ACTION AGAINST THE RADICAL ADVANCES OF A MILITANT, PURER MARXISM. THE MODERATES ARE DEPARTING THE LEADERSHIP OF THE LABOR HIERARCHY -- WILSON HAS RETIRED, CROSLAND HAS DIED, JENKINS HAS LEFT FOR EUROPE, CALLAGHAN WILL ABDICATE IN OPPOSITION. CONSERVATIVES WOULD ARGUE THAT THE LABOR PARTY NOW IS MOVING IRREVERSIBLY LEFTWARDS AND ONLY THE RATE OF THE SHIFT IS UNDER DISPUTE. AT SOME POINT, THE LEFT WILL CAPTURE THE LEADERSHIP OF THE PARTY AND CARRY ITS SHARE OF BRITISH POLITICS OFF THE CENTER FIELD.

THE TORY RIGHT:

7. THERE ARE OTHERS, HOWEVER, WHO SUGGEST THAT WHAT MAY IN TIME HAPPEN IN THE LABOR PARTY HAS IN FACT ALREADY HAPPENED IN THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY, BUT IN THE OPPOSITE DIRECTION. SINCE THE WAR, THE RIGHT WING OF THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY ALWAYS HAS ACTED AS A NOISY BRAKE ON THE MORE PROGRESSIVE TENDENCIES OF ITS LEADERSHIP, BUT IT WAS THE MODERATES WHO CONSISTENTLY ASSURED THE LINE OF TORY SUCCESSION -- CHURCHILL, EDEN, MACMILLAN, HOME, HEATH. THE IDEOLOGUES OF THE RIGHT PERHAPS KEPT THE TORY LEADERSHIP PHILOSOPHICALLY

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HONEST, BUT THEY NEITHER CHOSE LEADERS NOR MADE POLICY,
AND EVEN THE ECCENTRIC BRILLIANCE OF ENOCH POWELL
ENDED UP IN POLITICAL EXILE.

8. NOW, HOWEVER, SOME OBSERVERS REGARD THE BITTER 1974
LEADERSHIP CONTEST BETWEEN HEATH AND THATCHER AS REPRESENTING A SHIFT OR REVERSAL IN THIS LONG, STABLE
BALANCE WITHIN THE PARTY. IT IS THE LIBERAL WING,
THEY BELIEVE, WHICH NOW MUST ACT AS A BRAKE ON THE UN-
MISTAKABLE RIGHTWARD DRIFT OF THE NEW LEADERSHIP. AND
IT IS THE MODERATE VOICE ON A HOST OF ISSUES -- IMMIGRATION, INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS, AFRICA -- WHICH NOW HAS
DIFFICULTY INTERRUPTING THE INNER CONVERSATIONS AT THE
TOP OF THE PARTY. MOREOVER, THIS MODERATE, CENTRIST
ELEMENT WITHIN THE TORY PARTY HAS BEEN UNABLE TO /
COALESCE AROUND A SINGLE, FORCEFUL LEADER AND IS
THEREFORE INCREASINGLY INEFFECTIVE. THE NATURAL HEIR,
IAN MACLEOD, DIED LONG AGO. HEATH IS SULKING IN HIS
TENT, PRIOR IS ISOLATED, GILMOUR IS REMOTE, WALKER IS
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HOLLOW, WHITELOW IS CAUTIOUS.

9. MANY TORIES PROTEST THIS CHARACTERIZATION BUT WILL
NEVERTHELESS ADMIT THE ASCENDANCE OF THE RIGHT WITHIN
THE PARTY. STILL, THEY SAY, WHILE THE TONE OR ORIENTATION OF CONSERVATIVE LEADERSHIP MAY HAVE CHANGED, THE
PARTY REMAINS ESSENTIALLY PRAGMATIST WITH MEMBERS QUIT
ABLE TO COME DOWN ON ONE SIDE OR THE OTHER OF A GIVEN
ISSUE. THE REAL DANGER, THEY CONTINUE, REMAINS ON THE
LABOR SIDE, FOR THE LEFT OF LABOR IS COMMITTED TO A
RADICAL DOCTRINE WHICH PERMITS NO ABERRATION, AND THE
MODERATE MASK OF JIM CALLAGHAN MERELY DISGUISES THE
GRASPING REVOLUTIONARIES AT THE HEART OF THE PARTY.

THE BALANCE:

10. DISTINCTIONS ABOUT WHAT IS RIGHT-WING AND WHAT IS
LEFT-WING ALWAYS TEND TO BE TOO FACILE AND CAN OFTEN

BE MISLEADING. IT IS FAIR TO SAY, HTWEVER, THERE HAS BEEN A LOSS OF CONFIDENCE IN THE CENTER, AT LEAST WITHIN THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY, ALTHOUGH THIS KIND OF DISILLUSION AND FRUSTRATION HAS NOT BEEN UNIQUE TO BRITAIN. MOREOVER, IDEOLOGICAL RHETORIC IS NOT NEW TO BRITISH POLITICS, AND THE HISTORICAL PATTERN OF BOTH PARTIES HAS BEEN TO PURIFY PHILOSOPHY WHEN IN OPPOSITION AND THEN TO MOVE PROMPTLY AND PRAGMATICALLY TO THE CENTER WHEN IN OFFICE, FREQUENTLY TO THE DESPAIR OF THE GOVERNMENT BACKBENCH. TO SOME DEGREE, FOR EXAMPLE, THE RIGHT-WING TALK THAT NOW CHARACTERIZES SOME OF THE CONSERVATIVES IS REMINISCENT OF TED HEATH'S/LEADERSHIP IN OPPOSITION AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE "SELSDON PLAN", A PROGRAM FOR REDUCING GOVERNMENT INTERVENTION IN THE ECONOMY WHICH HEATH ABANDONED TO REALITY SHORTLY AFTER MOVING INTO NUMBER TEN.

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11. AS THE LIKELY PERFORMANCE OF A THATCHER GOVERNMENT IS SPECULATIVE, SO TOO IS THE FUTURE OF THE LEFT IN THE LABOR PARTY. THE LEFT'S ADVOCACY OF GREATER PUBLIC EXPENDITURE AND FURTHER NATIONALIZATION HAS BEEN CONSTRAINED BY THE GOVERNMENT'S MINORITY POSITION IN PARLIAMENT BUT IT IS ARGUABLE AT BEST WHETHER SUCH MEASURES, EVEN IF UNDERTAKEN, WOULD BE SIGNPOSTS ON THE BRITISH ROAD TO A PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC. THE SIZE OF THE TRIBUNE GROUP INDEED GREW AFTER THE 1974 ELECTIONS, BUT ITS INFLUENCE IN THE PARLIAMENTARY LABOR PARTY (PLP) DIMINISHED THEREAFTER. MOREOVER, THE TORY HYPOTHESIS IS CONTRADICTED BY THE RIGHT WING'S DOMINATION OF THE PLP, BY THE RECENT MODERATE TREND IN TRADE UNION ELECTIONS

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AND BY LABOR'S HEALTHY SECOND ECHELON OF TRADITIONAL SOCIAL DEMOCRATS -- HEALEY, HATTERSLEY, WILLIAMS, RODGERS AND OWEN. PERHAPS MORE IMPORTANT, CALLAGHAN'S TWO-YEAR TENURE HAS GONE A LONG WAY TOWARDS ENHANCING THE REPUTATION OF MODERATE, CENTRIST POLITICS, A REPUTATION HE WILL SEEK TO CONFIRM IN THE NEXT ELECTION. AS FOR THE FUTURE WE CAN EXPECT MODERATE CHALLENGES IN THE PLP AND NEC, WHICH WILL ENHANCE THE PROSPECTS OF ANOTHER MODERATE SUCCEEDING CALLAGHAN.

12. STILL, THERE ARE OBVIOUS DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE PARTIES, ESPECIALLY ON THE QUESTIONS OF ECONOMIC MANAGEMENT AND PUBLIC EXPENDITURE, AND THE DIFFERENCES HAVE ADDED WEIGHT WHEN SET AGAINST THE CONTINUALLY DISAPPOINTING PRODUCTIVITY OF THE BRITISH ECONOMY. IN THE FORTHCOMING ELECTION, LABOR WILL DOWNPLAY THE DOCTRINAIRE ASPECTS OF SOCIALISM BUT AT THE SAME TIME WILL WANT TO DEMONSTRATE THAT THE TORIES HAVE RELAPSED INTO AN ARCHAIC MENTALITY THAT IS ALMOST REACTIONARY AND CONFIDENTIAL

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BOUND TO CAUSE SOCIAL CONFRONTATION. THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY IS LIKELY TO BE MORE STRIDENT, NOT ONLY BECAUSE OF THE PERCEIVED DEMONOLOGY OF THE LABOR PARTY, BUT ALSO BECAUSE MRS. THATCHER BELIEVES THE MOOD OF THE VOTING PUBLIC HAS SHIFTED TO THE RIGHT -- AND PERHAPS ALSO BECAUSE CALLAGHAN HAS SO EFFECTIVELY CAPTURED THE CENTER THAT THE TORIES HAVE NOWHERE ELSE TO GO.

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